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THE HIJACK'S GODFATHER

IN DETERMINED myopia, government spokesmen persist in their assertion that the hijacking in Beirut was in no way triggered by Israel's release of the 1,150 terrorists a month ago. Rational analysis of the evidence is against them. The hijackers, after all, made a peculiar demand on Israel when they and their masters knew perfectly well that Israel would soon be implementing its declared decision of freeing the Lebanese prisoners held at Atlit.

Obviously then, the hijack was not intended to ensure the already certain release of the prisoners, but to get Israel to release them "at Shi'ite orders," to prove the power of the hijackers. What could have prompted their belief in the likelihood of such an ignominious surrender? The Israel government had just shown itself capable of an even more ignominious surrender. Surely now, it would not endanger scores of U.S. citizens, and infuriate the U.S. government and public to boot, by holding on to 760 Lebanese it intended to free anyway.

Shimon Peres and his colleagues should face the ineluctable fact that this is how the equation was pretty widely perceived among Americans. "If the Israelis could free all those murderers in exchange for three of their own soldiers, why can they not speed up a little the release of the much less dangerous Lebanese to save endangered Americans?"

IN ISRAEL, the sense of shame and utter frustration over the inglorious release of the 1,150 was only deepened by the new dilemma of the hijacking. There is only one rational way to mitigate these feelings: frank admission by the government that it had blundered, and a promise – and a warning to terrorists – that such a blunder will not be repeated.

There is, nevertheless, a slender silver lining in the cloud. It has passed unnoticed perhaps because of the tumult over the government's new economic policy. The aim of the hijackers was *not* achieved. Israel did not surrender the Shi'ite prisoners. The government with commendably calm deliberation duly implemented its repeated statements that it would free them only in accordance with its own timetable – and, with the release this week of 300, another 460 still remain to be released according to plan. The hostages are all free in the U.S.

THERE IS a recurring pattern in Hafez Assad's record in Lebanon. The launching of the civil war in Lebanon in the spring of 1976 – the onslaught on the Christians by the local Moslems in collaboration with the PLO – was masterminded by Damascus, which also supplied arms. The overwhelming superiority of the aggressors ensured the defeat of the Christians. With that defeat staring them in the face, they had moreover every reason to fear massacre on a large scale; and the Moslems, and their PLO allies, were poised to take over the government of the country.

This was the signal for direct Syrian intervention. Assad's forces went into Lebanon – to save the Christians. They took a substantial toll of lives among the surprised Moslem-PLO combatants, who had naively believed that the Syrians wanted *them* to take over Lebanon.

When some balance of forces was restored, the Syrians, having taken control of the Lebanese state through a puppet regime, resumed their more natural role against the Christian community. In renewed collaboration with the Moslems and the PLO, they made possible, *inter alia*, the monstrous domination of Southern Lebanon by the PLO.

Then came the crowning glory of Assad's strategy: the Syrians in 1976 went in to Lebanon in order to "put an end" to the civil war for which they were responsible in the first place, and they were not only accorded the approval of the other Arab states, but were also recognized, indeed hailed, as a "peace-keeping force." They retained the title throughout the bloody inter-communal fighting and aggression in the years that followed.

NOW ASSAD has done it again. His benign countenance shining out from Damascus this week brought a glow to hearts the world over. He was the one at whose orders the hijacked hostages were liberated; it was Assad whom the truculent hijackers obeyed without question, who brought to an end the unutterable anguish of 39 American families, the gnawing fears of a whole nation and the anxiety of all its friends.

He heard himself praised by the American president, his vice-president, and his secretary of state. He was described, moreover, to the world as a leader who was "cooperating with the U.S. in its fight against terrorism.

Without reason, media commentators have hastened to celebrate Assad as the great beneficiary of the hijacking crisis. After all, he had demonstrated that nothing significant happens in Lebanon "without him" – without, that is, his initiative or at least his approving nod.

Including, of course, the hijacking of an American plane.

The policy of coddling Syria wherever possible persists. Assad's brutality towards his own people is ignored. Syria is the favoured client and declared ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, but eyes are closed to this.

There was a moment during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 when the possibility arose of ending Syria's occupation – as will surely be shown by any detailed professional analysis of the war. That possibility was frustrated by repeated American political pressure, supported by a campaign of propaganda by Israeli opponents of the Begin government – pressure to which the government characteristically succumbed.

That moment passed; and Syrian power and authority in Lebanon has been reconfirmed and stabilized. Syrian authority is subordinate only to the USSR. (It was undoubtedly from Moscow, in the midst of negotiations with Washington for a "summit" meeting, that the order came to Assad to arrange the release of the American hostages.

This is a fact of life; and for the foreseeable future there should be no pretences or illusions either in Jerusalem or in Washington about its validity for them, no less than for the suffering majority in Lebanon.